

ORAL HISTORY 1988
BATHHOUSE WORK
ERNEST LEMON INTERVIEW

TRANSCRIBED BY GENE WOOD,PARK VOLUNTEER,MARCH 18,1997

I---STANDS FOR PERSON DOING THE INTERVIEW

EL--STANDS FOR ERNEST LEMON TALKING

NAMES OF PLACES ARE SPELLED AS HEARD,BUT NOT NECESSARILY
CORRECT

WORDS NOT CLEARLY UNDERSTOOD ARE IN BRACKETS []

TAPES ARE IDENTIFIED BY WRITING ON ACTUAL TAPE.

TAPE MARKED ERNEST LEMON IS SIDE "B"

I--This is May 5th.,1988,about 3:10 in the afternoon in the Buckstaff
Bathhouse.Go ahead and state your name and tell me how you got started
working in the bathhouses.

EL-My name is Ernest Lemon.I worked in the bathhouse in Hot Springs for
35 years.I started at a small one,it name was the [Al Hammer]Bathhouse in
Quachita,and I moved up to th' Lamar,in,I guess around 67,and came to the
Buckstaff in,ah,86,March 13. An'I've been in there ever since.

I--What did you start out as at the Al Hammer?

EL-Well,I started out in the laundry.I worked the laundry for about 6 months,
and I moved up to the pack room.An'durin'time we would bath an'pack over
2-300 people a day. An',ah,I finally worked up to be a bath attendant,
an' back then you just couldn't go in and be a bath attendant,you had to
work under somebody with experience first,you know,least 6 months to a
year.An' they would,ah,work ya' into the,to the bath attendant.I started
bathin' March 13 in 53. An' I've been bathin' ever since.Ah,I enjoy my
work [purty] good,I mean,you know,if you like to meet people,you enjoy
your work more,in this type of business. So,ah,if you don't like to meet
people,jus',I wouldn't even,you know,advise anyone to start in it.Cause
it's,ah,most it's meeting people and enjoyin' your works. You gotta'enjoy
your work,too.Ah,but mostly meetin' people,you know,different people from
all walks of life,all,from all over the world.I bathed people,I guess
jus' about,er,attending 'em,you know,where,I bathed Russians,I bathed
Japanese,Korean,Tiawan,Africans,you jus' gotta know how to meet people,
you know,in this type o' business.So I wouldn't advise[anyone to think]
about it,you know,bad,[unless they jus' like to meet people an' enjoy

talkin',jus' talkin'to 'em,you know.

I--Did you ever meet any famous people in the bath?

EL-Oh Ya',I bathed,ah,Jim Nabors,ah,an'now,I think the year of 86,an,ah'let's see,I bathed quite a few athletes,you know,come down,take the bath.

I--Was that recent years or further back?

EL-Ah,well,this is in 86 an'87. I think one time,I bathed quite a few football players an'basketball players in that year.Ah,it was,ah,[purty] good experience,you know,you meet this type of people.

I--From what,what kind of teams,which teams,state or?

EL-No,they was,ah,from the pros,they was ones from the Lakers,an'ah Boston,
I bathed a couple out o' Boston team.An'right now they look like they doin'[purty] good,both of 'em.

I--Were they here just for the bathes or here for other things?

EL-I think they was here for other things an'find out about the bathes,thru, you know,conversation,an'come in an' they really enjoy'd it,[an'they said, you know,after we get this],down this way again,they'll come in an' take the bathes cause theys'so much,you know,that's beneficial to 'em,you know,
it relax em', an' they says they hadn't relaxed like this in so long an'it really was a nice experience meetin' those people.They,you know,seem like they would be different,but they all the same when they get to talkin',you know.So that makes it [different]. Ah',I think,ah,that all the people that, that,you know,famous people,I think Jim Nabors was 'bout the nicest.He was
real nice,he'd sign autograph for everyone in the bathhouse that was there, an'couldn't get him to sing though,but he used ta'jus,you know,he'd talk to everyone,an'he'd invite us down to the Vapor Suite.Uh huh.So,ah,he's real nice to meet an' talk to.

I--Is there a part of the job you don't like?

EL-Well,ah.....Getting up early. You have to be in at least a quarter to 7, but we generally get here 15 after 6,but we have plenty time to get everything ready for customers,you know. An' I think it's best to be that way,

get a little early an'you have time to get everybody an' talk to some of the people thats here all,you know,cause lot o'customers like to get in early an' get their bath an' they are comin'in an'set around an' read the paper,an'you get to talk a little bit with your customers more than when you're workin'because if you get busy you don't have that much time to, you know,hold a long conversation like some of 'em like to do.But,if you get here early enough,you have plenty time to kinda shoot the breeze with 'em,you know.An' they enjoy it,too,you know,you'd like to take up a little more time with 'em than you would when you workin',because lotta' mornings you so busy,you jus',you know,you have ta'keep moving.An ah'.....

I--Is there anything you have to do to get ready to start in the mornings?

EL-Well,we,ah.we come in an'we wash our tubs again,and rinse 'em,[an'do it with two of 'em],an'then by the time you do all this an'get your soap up,we use,ah,coconut oil soap like we did,back a',I guess 76 years ago, because I worked with a fella name o' Herman Brown an ah'he had been bathin' 30 years fore I went to work at this place,at the Al Hammer,an um' he said he had been usin' that same type o' soap that we use now,that he did then. So,ah,we have to heat that a little bit,we don't want to put nothin' cold on nobody lessen'it's a cold pack,you know,[unless you getin' to hot] so generally we warm our soap up,we have it in containers,plastic containers,we set it in the hot water for it'd warm up some,an' that way it won't be cold to his body,you know,after gettin' out o' the hot water.

I--Do you have to,have some person that cleans the floors an'th'walls an'all, or do y'all have to do that?

EL-We do that.Ah,we do that on a daily basis,you know,an ah' we keep our areas clean where we work,see,[theys'3 people is bathin'] in the Buckstaff here an' they clean a certain area,an we jus' switch back & forth on the walk and aisles,you know,we keep our own everything,we got our own private little world,you know,[here] Bobby Howell,he works on the front end,I works on the second,an' Ricky works on the third side [o' the weeks],an he keeps his,everybody wants to keep his,you know,his personal workin'area clean,you know,so thats way we generally works that.

I--How many tubs do you have at a time?

EL-I have 4 tubs an' a swing tub. The swing tub we use as a, is what we call the big man tub,this tub is made outa'[alu],ah,stainless steel.An' we use it as a swing tub.Anybody gets a big man,we use,but generally if we get busy,when bathes tend to get busy,we borrow each others tubs,you know,

so we don't have no problem with that. But ah, that's the way it should be, everybody works together real good in the Buckstaff, [rather than in, you know, some I've worked]. But ah, I think, um, Buckstaff [not to bad], you know, with the personnel they have now. Ah, they seem to enjoy their work, an'.

I--Do you do the packs now, too?

EL--We, ah, do the packin', I do the bathin' an' ah, we give the sitz an' the steam. Each attendant takes care o' his own personal people, you know, [unclear].

I--[Which has it's packs attendants]?

EL--Lets see. Well, in 86, at the Lamar, we had, ah, oh, each bath attendant had his own pack man. An' ah, they would take jus' your individual people. When I came

EL--over here in March 13, I believe it was Mar, no March the 5th. in 85, 86, March yah, three months after they closed th' Lamar an' I came over 3 months after it, an' they didn't have, they don't th' pack man here, but I had packed before so it wasn't no problem, you know. Well, I did, I guess, everything [they] could be done in the bathhouses, like I said, I had worked the laundry at ah, the, at the Al Hammer an' I moved over into the tubs, into the pack role, an' then to the tubs. You had to work 6 months to, in one part, [then work] before you could, you know, move up 'cause that way give you a little time to learn [the other trade] like bathin', you know, but ah, when I started back in [um], they had a school in the Park Service office, upstairs, an' you had to go for 30 days an' learn few things, you know, 'bout how to take care your people an' different, ah, things, you know, so I went an' passed that, so, I was already been packin' so I knew most everything they was, an' how to get,

take care your people, you know, an' ah, I don't know [is jus' they shoulda] shouldn't stopped that school because you learn purty good, you know, things

you should know in the bathhouses that they don't teach anymore, you know,

lessen they work for an older guy, you know, some guy that been in the bathhouse business for a long time, because, well you've learned as you go to ah, I could learn somethin' [ev], you know every day, an' is jus like I say I been doin' it long time, but you can learn somethin' in the bathhouse everyday, [cause] everyday I learn somethin' new, you know, 'bout, but. An' another thing, I think, ah, about the bathhouse business is, I think it'd get better if, ah, if they could keep good help, you know, you gotta have good help on any type o' work or business that you in, to keep your business up, really.

I--[Is it harder to get a lot of help today,er?]

EL-Well,is,it,in the bathhouse business it would be,ah,well you'd to almost train a,a new man,you know. It's like I say,when I first started,I couldn't go right from the laundry to the tub without havin' to work with the pack room,for about 6 months to a year b'fo' I could get on the tubs,you know,if they,if they had openin',back then you didn't have the openin's cause the,you know,the old guys,they [hadda they wouldn't,hey,they love their job],they wouldn't move for anybody,you know,but one guy retired an'I took over,

you know,an ah,of his tub.It was ah,I liked it purty good but I knew a lot of people 'bout that time an' I been in the business for over 5 years an'I knew a lot of the people,you know,that was regulars,an'ah,it made a difference,you'd,tho after you started,you know,having 'em every year,it seem jus' like you looked for those people to be there,you know,an'if you [did,you were valuable an'wonder about it],an,ah, lot of 'em call ya or write ya an'it was a purty nice expeience,you know,for a young guy,who,[worked at that time],I'm glad to hear from somebody,you know,you know a few years.It was really nice.

I--You have any today that,that you've been seeing for a lot o'years?

EL-I have some people I bathed the first year I,[chuckle],that's a long time. I have a gentleman named Mr.Harper. He haven't missed a year since I been bathin' in the last 35 years,he was here this year. An'ah,I told him he didn't look a day older than the day I first,lets see,when I started that mornin' an' with th'tubs,givin' the bath,he was with a Mr.Brown,an'he looked [down and say,told this old bastard] say I'm go down and teach this young fella how to give a bath,an'he been with me ever since,an' year after year,35 years,thats a long time,and he still looks in good shape,you know,fo'80,he's 83 years old.He haven't missed a year tho.

I--How long did he stay?

EL-He stayed for 12 bathes,uh-hum. An'some,ah,I got quite a few,I got Mr.Brown,he been with me for 35 years,ah,an'he's gettin',you know,he's 'bout 90,but he come,he was here this year an' he say "I'll see ya next year",for every year he'd say the same thing.But it,it makes,you know,nice when you see him.I think it's kinda' wonderful,you know,to meet people that a',an'be around that long,an'jus' year after year,is somethin'else,you know,an' make you feel purty good 'bout yourself,anyway.

I--How much did you make when you started [workin']?

EL-We didn't make very much in ah,ah,I think most back at that time,the bathes

[unclear] really depended on the tip,I mean,people were more liberal with their money back in those years,early 50's. Ah,we made around .17 cents a man,I believe it was,[or some didn't made much].Hey,when you do like,ah, well,17 dollars a day,you know,17 dollars,we do over 300 men,daily,you made a little money,but you mostly depended on your tips [in that area] because,ah,I know lot o' days I went home,you know,more in tips than I would make in salary,but now,you know,things are little different,people don't have the money like they,so it's a little different now,really.

An'I,I know,ah,lot o' peoples in business back then,you know,had business, they would bring ya' some o' their products,you know,different things,you know,electric blankets,an'all,jus'most anything,you never did have to buy very much,really,because you had somebody in business that would bring ya'

an' they even send you,you know,to the mail. An'ah,Christmas time,oh,lot o' time you couldn't even carry the stuff home,people bring ya',you know, so that made it,it made it lot better an' made it nice cause you didn't make no lot o' money back then,really.Uh,Uh,no.But we survived.

I--You thinks it's better now [remainder of question unclear]?

EL-Well,I think,ah,salary wise it's better,because you make,you know,lot more money than you did if,if ah'we jus did,say,thirty people a day for one bath attendant,well he can come out,average out,purty well nice salary,but ah' 30 people back then,you couldn't survive,you know,but ah,I think,ah,I don't

EL-know,pack man,he was gettin'somethin' like .07 cents a man,[theys not very

much] but things a lot cheaper,too,then,an'dollar would go a long way,an'if you was careful.you could make it,you know.

I--Do you have very many people come in today with doctors' orders?

EL-Not as many as we used to,that's one thing I [want kinda ask]because,another

thing,ah,ah no,old bath attendants back when I started,they would ask a man

if he had heart condition o'high blood pressure.Well,that's way I do, started,you know,an'I had,I do it now.But I know that most young bath attendants,they don't do this,an'I [taught 'em they should be asked]because,

ah,if a man say,"ya,well,I had a heart attack 3 months ago"],well,I know not to make his water not 100 degrees,at 98 degrees is hot enough,thats' jus', [you know],but I,[theys] they was doin'this back long time,you know,an'you had to [partly learn] from the old attendants,you know,theys' purty,they was,

you know,purty smart people in,in their own way,you know,because they knew

how to take care o' man if he did get a little,little over-heated or somethin' like that,but,an' that's another thing 'bout that school,they taught a lot o' that Red Cross [stuff] at the school there,an'it helped along alot,you know,because we do have people that come in that,ah,have a tendency to heat up quick [an'those],you know,an' you gotta' know exactly what to do to keep 'em,you know,really [words inaudible],faintin'on ya,you know. I had a few faint on me,an'ah,it don't take long if you know what to do,you know,to get him back on his feet,an' have him feelin' good,you know,

but,you learned a lot t'all this as you go too,you know,an'you learn to look at a man an'you can almost tell that he's not able to take a 100 degree water,you know,which they said 98 to 100 degrees is all they should take. Lotta' times I wouldn't make it that hot,but,you know,because I can,you know, the experience you have bein'around people,you look at 'em an'tell right away that [words inaudible],you know. Had a man the other day that come in,he jus',I jus' looked at him an' I says,"How long you been outta' the hospital"? He says"How did you know I've been in the hospital"? I mean,after years an' years,[you know][an'he says "Well,I jus got 3 weeks ago". An'ah, you learn to look at a man when you introduce yourself to 'im as your bath attendant,an' right away,you know,your brain,you know, works a little bit,then you say,I better make this guy' water about 98 degrees,you know,[he don't have to tell ya'],you know, you look at a man an' tell,after so long,you jus'can't walk in off the street,then go to doin' nothin' like that 'cause I know I couldn't. It's almost 9 years for I could even,you know,an'ah,you gen'ly kin,ah,get by purty good with a man that,you know, his rep' you learn an'its,its gets easier,everything, your job an'everything,you know,cause ah,you know,[hav'n people fallen out

over here an' water over there] somethin' like that,but ah,jus' like I said,jus'take experience,you know,you have to be around him,cause it,the water heat some people up lot faster than it do others.I don't if your blood pressure different or maybe a little higher or little lower,[or EL-[some way],but that's my experience,eh',you learn to look at 'em an'use your own judgement,some,you know.An' you get a man that says,"Well,the waters not hot enough,can I get it jus' a little hotter".An'you got it up to a hundr'd degrees,you have to say "No,you can't have it no hotter",I said

"try this at this tempt'ure,if you're not satisfied".But they generally wind up hotter than they need to be anyway,see.Say that's what I tell these young fellas,I say if a man,I don't care what he offer,you don't make his water any hotter,you know.Let him take his first one at 100 degrees and see, an' he'll be hot enough when he get thru,you give him the steam,the sitz,an' your hot pack,an' then you wrap him in th',in th' sheets like we do,see,we be hot enough,you don't have to worry 'bout it,uh-uh. Most guys,you know, an' if you have a man fall out,or faint on ya,not fall out,faint,you should try t'get him back to normal quick as possible,that's my experience,I,you know,I wouldn't do that[words inudible],we used to have men dat'come in an'

drink,you know,back in the early 50's,be drinking a lot an' been up all night,an' they pass out on ya'in nude,the best thing is to get him back with cold towels as quick as possible,that's the best way,don't leave him out,to,you know,let him lay around to long,you know,get him back to his, an'get him a cool shower,let him go to the coolin' room,[that's the bes']. That's my experience,I had quite a few back in them early 50's,because you know,town was open an' ev'body was havin'a good time,drinkin'a lot, you know,an' then they come in an'have a bath,but they really didn't realize that ah,this water was as powerful as it is,is' somethin',I tell you.Ah, I thought about it when I first ordered it,ah,it,well,les'see what it is you know,an' I found out,its really somethin' to,that it really,uh huh.

I--How would you say this business changed over the years?

EL-Well,you know it's,there's been a lot o'changes.When I first started,jus like the heat exchangers they put in. That was a big change because we used

to use the resevoir on the hill,you know,an' the business,really is should be a lot more people takin' the bathes than it is now.I don't know if its [appetites] or bathes,or what they are,but lot o'people jus don't understand,that's all,you know,you'd have,you should have,ah,somebody,you know,

ta' tell 'em that,ah,try one,you know, tha's the best way,you,you can't go wrong by tryin' one,you know,then see what it's all about,tha's,tha's what I think is,is really hurtin' the business,jus'that people don't, aint curious enough to try one,then see what it's like.A lot of people tha's tried it now,I don't know,if it's appetites helpin' us that way,too, it'd be better when they have a little more appetite for the bathhouses, cause we used to do one appetite,you know,in the business but I think all business need some type o'appetizer.

I--[Seeing] Know when all these bathhouses were built,they had so many more

tubs for all [the men side and not the ladies],are there still a whole lot more men that come,er,do you think its less men that come nowadays?

EL-Nah,I thinks' it more ladies that take the bathes than do the men,because ladies still th',you know,theys purty curious,they [even wanta try somethin',you know,so ah,an 'the men,well they gen'lly follow their wife, but lotta' mens',you know,don't have wives,but theys'lot of 'em will try it anyway,but most men,ahhhh,I bathe [do why],who my wife told me I had to try this,you know.That was,that's it right there,an'ah,maybe if you got th' single man to come in more often then,you know,like the married men because they don't [follow] their wives,you know,I'm goin'to try it too [the hell] my wives take it,you know,its'jus alright,you know,so thats' the difference.I believe if they get the single an' the younger college age people t' try it,I believe they would benefit a lot from it,because it is a different experience than most I've seen,ah,I taken bathes when I was in Japan,an' it's not near nothin'like is here,you know,the waters e'en,not e'en [can't] compare.The water here,you,is so much different than that water in Japan that they say was good for ya',you know,I couldn't then maybe I didn't try it enough,I mean here I know what they got,you know,theys' lot better,an that that I had over there,because I didn't get no results out o' it,this here ya'do,you know,anybody try one,you know,they can tell right away,I'm so relaxed I can't get up,you know,well,so what you gonna' do.

I--Well,thanks for talking with me.

EL-Well,I'm glad to do this,because if [showed] this as advertisement,it might help.